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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3178  
INFO RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5458  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3182  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3047  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3702  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1062  
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3736  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL, ECA, IIP

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SUBJECT: TURKMEN REACTION TO PRESIDENT OBAMA'S JUNE 4, 2009 SPEECH  
AT CAIRO UNIVERSITY

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Post held a series of roundtable discussions with alumni of U.S. programs and representatives of local NGOs to determine local reaction to President Obama's speech. General consensus was that Americans were more likely to hold stereotypes about Muslims in general rather than about Turkmen in particular, as most Americans know nothing of Turkmenistan. Participants felt that world media is partially to blame as negative events involving Muslims are more likely to be covered than positive actions and a false impression is given. Participants stated that Islam in Turkmenistan is unlike in other parts of the Muslim world and America's failure to recognize this is one recurring problem. Participants also stated that current tensions are not caused by religious differences but by underlying factors, such as inter-tribal contention, poverty, and corruption, which are ignored or trivialized. Until these conditions are met they felt that no real change can be affected. Effects of tribal culture on local religious practices were also addressed. END SUMMARY.

TURKMEN PERCEPTION OF AMERICAN STEREOTYPES REGARDING TURKMEN

¶2. (SBU) Participants, including alumni of U.S. programs and NGO representatives, in a series of roundtable discussions on July 20 and July 21. Discussions were facilitated through post staff and guided by a series of discussion questions focused on Turkmen perceptions of Islam, America's response to Islam, and local reaction to points raised by President Obama. Participants complained that the majority of Americans had never heard of Turkmenistan before. They also said when they tell Americans Turkmenistan's geographic location (bordering Iran and Afghanistan), individuals automatically inquired about terrorism and Islamic extremism. Participants objected to being categorized as religious extremists and stated that Americans fail to differentiate between nations and peoples, instead assuming all Muslims are interchangeable. They also reported being offended by assumption regarding dress, diet, and treatment of women. The participants said that while most Americans know about the USSR, they were not informed about the countries formed after its dissolution. Attendees stated that following years of Soviet control and enforced

official atheism, Turkmenistan's view of religion is much different and more shaped by cultural norms, than laws from the Koran.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSLIM IDENTITY TO A TURKMEN

13. (SBU) Participants reported pride in being Muslim, but said it is not at the forefront of their minds. They stated that Turkmen practice religion in the home through traditions and ceremonies passed down through families, but not publicly in the mosques. They added that outsiders might see the way they live and consider it as following a Muslim or religious way of life. They, however, do not view their traditions as "religious." They are following practices handed down from other generations, often irrespective of religious significance.

#### DO TURKMEN BELIEVE OBAMA WILL BE EVEN HANDED WITH THE ISRAELIS AND THE PALESTINIANS

14. (SBU) Participants stated that Obama is an experienced politician and he knows what to say, but they do not believe his statements regarding American neutrality in brokering Israeli Palestinian peace initiatives. (COMMENT: The assumption that politicians are inherently dishonest is also a reflection of deeply ingrained Turkmen cynicism regarding politicians. END COMMENT.) However, participants also said it is important for leaders to be seen as fair and unbiased, without taint of a double standard. Participants said that America is responsible for Israel's creation and still considers that country the U.S.' offspring, adding that the U.S. relationship with Israel allows America a level of control and influence in the region. One man did remark that Israel is the only democratic piece in a region comprised largely of totalitarian

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regimes. He said Israel attacks only in retaliation, and he agreed with America's support of Israel because he did not like the alternatives.

#### ON WHETHER TURKMEN BELIEVE WESTERN-STYLE DEMOCRACY IS POSSIBLE IN MUSLIM LANDS

15. (SBU) During the discussion regarding the potential for democratic governments in Muslim nations participants unanimously agreed that the potential varied widely from country to country. They stated that in some nations, Western-style democracy is possible, especially in the case of Turkey. Participants also stated that maintaining a transparent government is problematic in Muslim nations because of tribal structures, not because of religion. Participants stated that the tribal system -- which dominates the region -- presents the biggest threat and impediment to democratic process. Participants felt that attempts at democratization would be constantly stymied by contention and internal power struggles, until these systems erode. Participants felt that democracies cannot flourish until individual mentalities change.

#### ON WHETHER IT IS POSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE THE GOALS OF UNITY ADDRESSED BY OBAMA IN HIS SPEECH

16. (SBU) Participants claimed that nations must first abandon enforced religious practices before it will be possible to achieve goals of unity that President Obama mentioned in his speech. Participants felt that countries must establish secular governments and allow religion to be freely practiced, without government interference, in order for nations to treat each other as equals. They said that as long as state religions and tribal clans dominate the Muslim world, only an armed truce can be achieved. Participants also noted that President Obama only discussed religions in conflict with Christianity, and ignored the many other faiths, including Hinduism and Buddhism, which exist in America.

#### IS IT POSSIBLE TO FIND A PEACEFUL ANSWER TO EXISTING RELIGIOUS WARS

17. (SBU) Participants cynically approached the topic of peaceful answers to existing religious wars because "these fights have always existed." Participants added that religion is just an excuse for these longstanding conflicts to perpetuate themselves. Participants

remarked that "we don't really have religious wars, but these wars are fought over economic, social, and territorial issues. As long as these issues are in conflict, war will continue, whether under the guise of religion or some other label." Participants also claimed some individuals use religious claims to benefit themselves, to gather influence, power, and wealth. Participants said that religious wars will end once everyone lives in democratic, secular nations, but until then, the problems will continue.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Participants felt strongly that corruption and tribal based nepotism were the true evils today in Muslim societies. They stated that while America and the West can make overtures, hatred and bitterness would continue to rise from the difficult lives that people lead, as well as corrupt governments in this part of the world. This hatred is really a reaction to corruption and lack of freedom at home. Participants felt that determining an answer to modern religious conflicts will only be possible when all participating nations offer their citizens equal protections and freedoms. END COMMENT.

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